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Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Patchwork federal regulations are inadequate to protect the public from chemical spills such as the one last month that contaminated drinking water for 300,000 West Virginia residents, members of Congress and state officials said at a hearing Tuesday.

Although there was disagreement on some of the specifics, Democrats and Republicans on a Senate Environment and Public Works subcommittee agreed that the federal government needs to do more to protect the water supply from toxic chemicals.

“Americans have a right to expect, when they turn their tap on, the water they get is safe,” said Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Md., the subcommittee chairman. “Our laws are just not strong enough to deal with the current situation.”

Committee leaders are backing a bill that would require states to inspect chemical facilities that could threaten a public water system every three years. It was introduced by West Virginia Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin and Jay Rockefeller and the committee chairwoman, Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif.

Cardin said he thinks the bill has a good chance of passing, but House Speaker John Boehner has said there are enough regulations on the books, blaming the spill on a lack of enforcement.

On Jan. 9, 7,500 gallons of coal-cleaning chemicals seeped into the Elk River in Charleston, just 1.5 miles upstream from the region’s water treatment plant. Freedom Industries, which owned the plant where the chemicals leaked from a tank, has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

“They’re cowards, and running away and leaving the people is an outrage,” Boxer said of Freedom Industries. “How about having some corporate responsibility?”

The site was not subject to state or federal environmental regulations, and the chemical that spilled is one of more than 80,000 substances not regulated under the federal Toxic

Substances Control Act. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., is sponsoring bipartisan legislation to reform that law, but Boxer said the chemical involved in the West Virginia spill would have been classified as a low priority under that bill.

The Manchin bill would subject aboveground chemical storage facilities to similar regulations to those applying to oil facilities. West Virginia officials who testified Tuesday said they supported the bill.

A lobbyist for the aboveground liquid tanker industry and a lawyer who has defended chemical companies in class-action lawsuits both urged caution in adopting new regulations, saying that quick federal action might not address the problem.

“The presence of a federal regulatory gap doesn’t mean that a hazard exists uniformly across the nation,” said the attorney, Richard Faulk. “A one-size-fits-all federal approach may sometimes even reduce safety.”

In response to a question from Boxer, Erik Olson of the Natural Resources Defense Council said it was nearly impossible to know how many aboveground chemical storage facilities have the potential to release contaminants into the U.S. water supply. Peter Weaver, the lobbyist for the International Liquid Terminals Association, also said he did not have that figure.

Rockefeller made an impassioned plea for federal action, saying that residents of his state have a fatalistic attitude about industrial accidents.

“Regulation is soft in West Virginia. It’s always been soft,” he said. “I’m here, angry, upset, shocked, embarrassed that this would happen to 300,000 absolutely wonderful people.”